

What Would Jesus Drink? Engaging the Culture

By Mike Zehnder

How the Church engages with culture is a crucial question. Is God at work in every culture or only in the Church and in "churchly activity"? Augustine spoke of a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person that remains unsatisfied apart from God. Is God at work even through that vacuum, drawing people to Himself? Scripture speaks of the rain that falls even on the unjust and Paul noted, "In Him we live and move and have our being," an obvious reference to the activity of God among even unbelievers, a working beyond mere regeneration and sanctification of Christians.

Recently I saw a 20-something man sporting a T-shirt with the large letters "W. W. J. D." Lest you think this was a sincere question you will want to know that beneath these familiar letters stood a sarcastic interpretation of the acronym: "What Would Jesus Drink?" Pictures of various kinds of booze and beer bottles were depicted underneath it.

While the T-Shirt wearer seemed to be asking an irreverent or impudent question, in truth, the answer is that, in addition to water, Jesus drank some popular beverages of His culture. His first miracle created wine out of water at a wedding party that had already managed to blow through its main wine supply. At His "Last Supper," he drank at least three cups of wine common to the method of celebrating the Passover and commented that it was His last drink of wine until heaven. On the cross, He drank wine vinegar.

What would Jesus drink? Part of the answer is that He would drink common beverages of His culture. However, in some Christian circles, a person's faith would be questioned if he or she drank certain drinks, especially "unchristian" alcoholic ones.

Just recently, the Southern Baptists of the Texas Convention replaced the bylaw that required all SBTC employees and elected officials to abstain from drunkenness (a biblical command) with a demand that all SBTC employees and elected officials abstain from "the use of alcohol as a beverage." A popular SBC blogger, Wade Burleson, used the occasion to make a tongue-in-cheek case for abstinence of all tea drinking to separate oneself from this cultural practice as a means of proclaiming true Christianity. His main points:

- Drinking tea leads a person to addiction to caffeine.
- Tea and coffee are destructive to the Christian's body, which is the temple of God.
- Though the Bible does not expressly forbid the drinking of tea, there is an overwhelming preponderance of Biblical evidence that tea drinking is a sin.
- Though some have the gall to say Jesus drank tea on the cross, it was clearly not the same kind of tea or substance that tea drinkers consume today.
- The argument that drinking tea is not illegal in the United States, and therefore, lawful for the Christian, is an argument straight from hell.
- Some cultures drink tea as a normal part of daily life, but that is no excuse for Christians to drink it, since we are to be 'a cut above' the world.

- When a Christian purchases tea he is supporting an entire industry that has made a fortune by leading people to the mind altering, destructive, and nearly impossible to break addiction to caffeine.
- It has been scandalously reported that some young, Southern Baptist pastors are actually having Bible studies in the local Starbucks in an effort to lead people to Christ.
- A great concern for the loosening of the standard of total abstinence from tea drinking is the belief that those Southern Baptist moderates and liberals who drink tea will eventually cause the Southern Baptist Convention to turn back from a firm belief in the inerrancy of the Bible.
- Drinking caffeinated tea for recreational purposes physiologically acts as a “mind altering drug.”

To capture the full extent of Wade's humor and sarcastic questions about Christians who engage the culture in a participatory way you really need to read his comments under each point on his blog at <http://kerussocharis.blogspot.com/2007/11/personal-holiness-by-abstaining-from.html> .

The point of such absurdities is that the Church too often divides “sacred” from “secular” when for the Christian there is no such thing – ALL activity that springs from faith is sacred, whether a “pagan” style of music used in church or a “pagan” beverage used at communion. The most common of things in life – eating and drinking – are set apart for God not necessarily by mere substance but by intent and consecration: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31)

Considering the profound truth of human activity, which simultaneously touches the sacred and the mundane, someone curious about biblically engaging culture might ask, “What music style would Jesus prefer?,” “What movies would Jesus reference in His teaching?,” “What projection software would Jesus use for His sermon points?,” “When preaching, would Jesus wear comfortable shoes like Adidas, Rockport, or would he go with classic Florsheims?,” “What television programs would Jesus watch and discuss?,” “What sports teams would Jesus like or use in His illustrations?,” “What model of car would Jesus drive to church or would He favor bicycles or horse and buggies like the Amish?,” “Would Jesus drink Coke or Pepsi, caffeine free or regular, with or without lemon, sugared or flavored with Nutrasweet?,” and so on.

Can the Church engage the culture in familiar activities such as worship, music, or conversation? The answer is, of course! In His ministry, Jesus would and Jesus did. His followers would do well to follow and engage their cultures in faith for the glory of God. As Paul wrote by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, “Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves.” (Romans 14:22)

Questions for Reflection

1. What power does the gospel have to engage and/or influence culture?
2. Where are the boundaries for the Church as it seeks to engage the culture? Who/what sets the boundaries and how are they determined?
3. How does your church learn the culture?
4. How does your church engage the culture?

5. What can you do to engage the culture with the message of Jesus?
6. What is one thing you will do to help your congregation engage the culture?

Links

[The Church and Contemporary Culture](#) by Paul Tillich

From the article: "A second consequence of this concept of religion, which we can call an existential one, is the disappearance of the gap between the sacred and the secular realm. If religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, this state cannot be restricted to a special realm. The unconditional character of this concern implies that it refers to every moment of our lives, to every aspect and every realm. The universe is God's sanctuary. Every work day is a day of the Lord, every supper a Lord's Supper, every work the fulfillment of a divine task, every joy a joy in God."

PDF: [Being The Church In Culture](#) by Tim Keller

Keller explores how the church can and should be in culture using the book of Acts as a model. He highlights these six points:

1. More Christians Living Long-Term In Cities
2. With A Better Understanding Of The Gospel
3. Living As Dynamic Counter-Cultures In The City
4. Integrating Their Faith And Their Work
5. Radically Committed To The Good Of The City As A Whole
6. Contextualizing The Gospel Message

Video: [The Need for Cultural Immersion](#) by Mark Driscoll

Podcast: [The Need for Cultural Immersion](#)

In an interview Mark Driscoll shares his thoughts on the need for Christians to understand people and the culture that surrounds the church. He highlights the importance of meeting people in "third places," i.e. places where they go to relax, have fun or engage others outside of home and work.

[Personal Holiness: Abstaining from Tea Drinking](#) by Wade Burleson